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**The
Reviewing Stand**

Vol. 11: No. 8

August 29, 1948

What Can Adults Learn?

A radio discussion over WGN and the Mutual Broadcasting System

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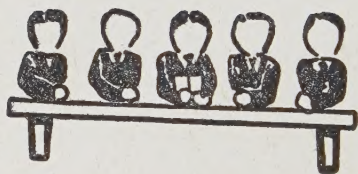
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Broadcast continuously since 1934 by Northwestern University



THE REVIEWING STAND is a weekly radio forum presented by Northwestern University. The program was first broadcast by Station WGN, Chicago, October 14, 1934. It has been on the air continuously since that time, originating in the WGN studios, and, since 1935, carried by the stations of the Mutual Broadcasting System. THE REVIEWING STAND presents members of the Northwestern University faculty and distinguished guests from business, government, education, and the press in round table discussions of contemporary problems—the questions that are in the news. The program is under the direction of James H. McBurney, Dean of the School of Speech, Northwestern University; Miss Myrtle Stahl, Director of Educational Programs, WGN, Chicago; R. E. Buchanan, Director of Radio, Northwestern University; Mrs. Kathryn Johnson, Assistant to the Director; Mrs. Mary Clark, Secretarial Chief.

Northwestern University on the air, The Reviewing Stand, published weekly beginning May 2, 1943, by the Northwestern University Radio Department, Evanston, Illinois. Entered as second class matter May 21, 1943, at the Post Office, Evanston, Illinois, under the Act of March 3, 1875. Subscription price, \$1.00 for 26 weeks. Single copies, 10c.

What Can Adults Learn?

MR. BUCHANAN: What can adults learn?

MR. McCLOUD: There are four essential things necessary in this life, especially in adult life. The first is religion. The second is love. The third is work. And the fourth—an important thing—is a hobby.

MR. SEASHORE: For these four fields the limitations of adult learning are largely imaginary. If you want to learn you can.

MR. POSEY: Yes, I have seen that demonstrated in tens of thousands of cases. An adult can learn just as easily as a younger person.

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MR. BUCHANAN: Many people seem to feel that learning ends with the last day of school, whether it be grammar or high school or college. Their summer vacation actually is extended to the remainder of their lives. Even those of us who try to keep on learning each day may be surprised at what we can learn as discussed by today's *Reviewing Stand* speakers.

McCloud, I know that you continued your education and schooling throughout adult life. Why did you follow this course?

MR. McCLOUD: We need more education and religion in this world. It is true that we are entitled to a certain amount of pleasure, but each one of us has a duty or obligation, first to his religion, second to his country, third to his family, and fourth—by all means—to humanity.

What Are Learning Limitations?

MR. BUCHANAN: Well, Seashore, I note that you speak of the difficulties in adult learning as being imaginary. Is this true for everyone? It seems to me there are certain limitations which prevent older persons from learning.

MR. SEASHORE: I think those limitations are very exceptional. There are some physiological difficulties that might account for individual inability to learn, but this would not be true of most people. Actually, scientific studies of the rate at which people learn or the extent to which they can learn show that there are no great differences from one decade to another, beginning with the 20's and going on up into the 60's. In fact, the only real differences are found where speed is important, and there are many human types of learning where speed is not important.

MR. BUCHANAN: I suppose that would fit in with your experience, Posey, at University College, where you have students of many ages. How does learning vary with these groups?

MR. POSEY: Students in our evening classes vary in age from 17 to 70. I have made spot studies of the records achieved by persons in various age groups. These show very clearly that it is the older person who learns best, at least as judged by records in evening courses. I suppose one might say that this results from the fact that the older person has a greater background of experience. But when an adult takes up a subject totally alien to anything he has done in his life before—say a person begins to study a foreign language such as Spanish—that experiential background wouldn't seem to be the reason why older people learn more than younger ones.

MR. BUCHANAN: What you have been saying here, gentlemen, seems to disagree entirely with the conception that learning decreases after a certain age. Psychologically isn't that true, Seashore, at about the age of 18 to 20?

MR. SEASHORE: No, I don't think it is because there are various kinds of learning. You lose your ability to pick up we'll say—athletic co-ordination to some extent, but you don't have any such loss in many mental functions. In fact, in measuring the vocabulary last year we found that some people in their 70's were doing just as well as people in their 40's, certainly one of the best indications of intellectual vigor.

MR. McCLOUD: Seashore, isn't it true that the scientists have proved that the mind does not decline as rapidly as the body?

MR. SEASHORE: I think that certainly is true, McCloud, and we have many instances where people who are in poor health continue to make great intellectual achievement. Likewise, we have people in very good health who don't have any intellectual achievements. Some people are mentally dead at 18 instead of 80.

MR. BUCHANAN: To follow up the psychological studies on the speed of learning, you say that the ability to learn rapidly does decline after a certain age?

How Important Is Age?

MR. SEASHORE: Yes, but that decline is only about 10%. It really isn't a matter of our being able to learn or not learn in a reasonable period of time. We have plenty of time to learn.

MR. POSEY: Isn't that, perhaps, a matter of reflexes? We know that the older a person gets the slower his reflexes become. But that doesn't affect his ability in any respect except as a matter of speed.

MR. SEASHORE: I think that is true, but to compensate for that difference we have the application of previous experience and that may more than make up for any neural-muscular losses. In fact, while a younger person can learn a principle about as well as an older person, the older one can enrich his learning. He has many more applications and recognitions of the principle, as well as the bare understanding of the principle itself.

MR. BUCHANAN: That seems paradoxical. First we say that the older person learns more slowly; then we say he learns faster. You mean he applies his experience? Is that the idea, Posey?

MR. POSEY: I think that is the answer. He knows how to use his own energies more effectively. He doesn't try to study high school algebra, listen to the radio at the same time and try even a third thing. He concentrates.

MR. SEASHORE: In addition to that the older person has frequently explored a lot of the possible ways in which he could learn, and he has found which ones are likely to be blind alleys and which ones have much greater promise, offering rewards for additional study.

MR. BUCHANAN: McCloud, what has been your actual experience? Do you find that as your education continues through the years it becomes more difficult to learn?

MR. McCLOUD: I think it is easier. As you go along you get more expe-

rience, you have a broader viewpoint, you are more tolerant of the other person's viewpoint.

To get back to these four fields I spoke about, in religion, love, work, or hobby. Now an education in any one of these subjects is well worth while. It will bring you happiness and satisfaction. You will never achieve happiness if that is all you desire in this world. But, if you take an interest in any one or all of the four, then you will have happiness.

MR. BUCHANAN: This interest, I suppose goes beyond the age level, then?

MR. SEASHORE: You can have a person who is badly adjusted because he is postponing everything for his future life or waiting until he retires before he is going to do these interesting things. We have to establish a balance between doing things now and later.

MR. POSEY: I think that most of us don't realize that practically no person ever works at his full capacity.

MR. SEASHORE: Except maybe in the 100-yard dash or a pole-vault among Olympic champions.

MR. POSEY: Of course I am speaking about week after week and month after month.

MR. SEASHORE: So the rest of us have plenty of ceiling for improvement in learning even after we are 70 or 80.

Everyone Can Improve

MR. POSEY: Yes, the studies of Elton Mayo and Dr. Packard at Harvard have shown, I believe, that by and large the average person on the job doesn't work at much more than 50% of the rate at which he could work.

MR. SEASHORE: I think that estimate is much too high. I would say that 15% is nearer our everyday activities; and when you are talking about expanding your horizons a little bit I am sure 15% is a good figure.

MR. BUCHANAN: If age is not so important, then, in learning, is there any difference between the sexes? Do men learn faster than women, or vice versa, Posey?

MR. POSEY: Well, I think that in some respects men and women are interested in different subjects. I am reminded of the young lady—maybe not so young—who was uncertain of which course she should take in the evening school. She asked me what anthropology was. I said, "Why, anthropology is the study of man."

"Oh," she said, "I think I'll take that course."

However, I don't believe there is any significant difference in the learning abilities of men and women.

MR. SEASHORE: Posey, I can back you up on that statement. There are whole books written on the study of sex differences. Superiority lies about equally often with either sex, and where there is a superiority, it is frequently very small. Even then I think we have to say that we don't know what we can do. During the war women took over jobs that they hadn't tried before and showed that they could do those, too. We don't need to exclude the ladies or the men in our statements about what you can do in adult life.

MR. BUCHANAN: Then if we exclude age and sex, there must be some

reason that learning is different for various people. What differences are there in this matter of working at full capacity?

MR. SEASHORE: I think we have an answer in a technical term in psychology called the "level of aspiration."

MR. BUCHANAN: It sounds wonderful. What does it mean?

MR. SEASHORE: In plain English—how high are you aiming? It isn't just a matter of how hard you are pushing. If you are just pushing on a dead level, you stay on a dead level. But, if you aim at some new and more difficult achievement, then you have some chance of realizing that achievement.

MR. POSEY: Well, let's go back a little earlier than that, Seashore. It seems to me that it is a matter of motivation. You are saying that you should always set your sights a little higher than you have before.

MR. SEASHORE: That's right.

MR. POSEY: But I say that the important thing is how hard you want to do a thing, without relation to what you have done before—the extent and the depth of your motivation—that is important.

MR. SEASHORE: But adults have an advantage there, wouldn't you say, McCloud, in that an adult has found out which of these things are less interesting or more interesting and so he can channel his motivation more effectively than someone who is constantly distracted by 17 new things that he can do every day.

Diversity of Activities Is Important

MR. McCLOUD: Absolutely. The older you are, the more experience you have and the more stimulating you are.

MR. BUCHANAN: That would fit in with your four-point program, if I can call it that. You aren't, then, selecting any one of these things as more important. You are diversifying your activities?

MR. McCLOUD: That's true. You should have an interest in each of the four and in all of them.

MR. SEASHORE: I would like to have you illustrate that, McCloud. You say that we should be able to learn in everything. How does this apply to golf?

MR. McCLOUD: You have asked me a very embarrassing question. Most of us take up the game of golf as if it were a business. We set out to beat our opponent or get a better score. We forget that the real purpose of the game is to be out in the open air, to be closer to nature, to be glad you are alive.

MR. SEASHORE: In that case, if you stop gloating over beating your opponent, or if you stop worrying over the fact that he beat you, you might at least relax. That might help you on the next hole.

MR. McCLOUD: You won't relax, but at least you won't be distracted from the game. You will have to keep your mind on it.

MR. POSEY: It seems to me that this can be put another way: Every person lives essentially with himself. But at the same time, if he centers his motives only about things that are selfish, he will find that the satisfaction of those motives doesn't produce the happiness for which he is really aiming.

MR. BUCHANAN: What do you mean by that? Can you give an example?

MR. POSEY: A young chap feels that he would have everything he could possibly desire if he were to purchase a brand new car, loaded with chromium plate. He gets the car. And then he finds that the car doesn't bring him the satisfaction, the happiness, that he thought it would. His motive has been too self-centered. He thought too much about himself and experiences the disappointment of an achievement which doesn't give him what he thought it would.

MR. SEASHORE: I think we have another example in the statements of art appreciation experts that when you go to see an art gallery you see only what you have learned to see. There may be the most fabulous collection of paintings available in the world, but you may have my previous experience of just making your feet sore by walking so far and looking at so many paintings. One of my colleagues happened to point out to me at this stage of the game that there was a very interesting evolution of the painting of hands, one of the most difficult techniques in painting. I went back and looked at the same pictures and had a vastly greater appreciation because I had learned to look at them in a different way.

MR. BUCHANAN: Would this philosophy of looking beyond yourself apply especially to your point about hobbies, McCloud?

Should You Learn to Help Others?

MR. MCLOUD: Yes. Your interest in these things will give you a broader viewpoint and appreciation of the better things of life. You will have a better understanding of your responsibilities, and you will be better equipped to carry on your work, whether it is in golf, your everyday work, or other activities.

MR. BUCHANAN: I am not sure if I understand. If I want to learn, you mean I should find out how that learning would help others? Posey, what do you think of that?

MR. POSEY: No, I don't think that's it. It is like the pursuit of happiness. If you pursue happiness directly, you will not achieve it. Today a person who has a narrow background of education and experience and who leads a life which is simply one routine, one habit after another—a person who is in a rut—doesn't have the background, the resources to enjoy the world and the things that he does.

MR. SEASHORE: Well, I would like to come back to this business of an indirect pursuit of your goal. It is said among professors that the best way to learn something is to give a course in it. If you try to do something for other people, to assist their understanding, you will understand it better yourself.

MR. BUCHANAN: Let us take another case, then. If we can assume that I am quite satisfied with my life and I don't particularly care to learn, is there any worry for me, Seashore?

MR. SEASHORE: I would like to point out that there has been a great deal of overemphasis on adjustment—personal adjustment, emotional adjustment, and social adjustment. The popular best-selling books are going

strong on this theme, and John Watson pointed out before any of them was written that the only really adjusted person is a dead one. [Laughter.] That fits in with this level of aspiration, too. You have to keep trying new and more challenging things to really get any enjoyment out of what you are doing.

MR. BUCHANAN: Well, then, the whole thing seems to me a cycle. One builds onto the other. You can never be satisfied.

MR. POSEY: Yes it is a cycle, Buchanan, in which the individual can get the benefit of his own compound interest. The more he learns and the broader his interests, the more he can learn still further, the more he can enjoy life. It is a self-perpetuating proposition.

MR. BUCHANAN: Like a snowball rolling downhill?

MR. POSEY: That's right.

MR. BUCHANAN: That fits into McCloud's four-point plan. Do you think such learning actually leads to a fuller life, McCloud?

MR. McCLOUD: There isn't any question about it. Someone once said that more education meant more earning power and more wanting things. I think the best illustration of that is this: I heard a scientist once say that the best educated man he knew was the one who realized how much he did not know. Now the more knowledge you have, the better life you will have and the more you will be able to fulfill your destiny in this life.

What Are Fields of Learning?

MR. SEASHORE: As one of my friends said, McCloud, the trouble with us is that we don't understand so much of what we think we know.

MR. BUCHANAN: Let's take an example then. I am a person who wants to learn. What fields can I go into? I have agreed with everything you said, but how do I go about this thing, Posey?

MR. POSEY: You are referring now to the means of learning? Is that right?

MR. BUCHANAN: Yes.

MR. POSEY: Well, of course the means of learning are almost legion. Books, for example, the great storehouse of books that one finds in libraries. There is no question that one can find much information about a subject in books.

MR. SEASHORE: I would like to point out that we aren't all interested in books—maybe some of us have to spend most of our working days with books—and that we can learn about many other things just by keeping our eyes and ears open. For example, this business of learning what makes the wheels go round, or how things are built is so fascinating that John D. Rockefeller had a special set of bleachers constructed in front of Radio City for the "sidewalk superintendents" to sit and inspect critically what was going on. [Laughter.] You can watch anything that is going on and learn a lot about it.

MR. BUCHANAN: That reminds me of the cartoon in which a gentleman reserves a seat right on the steam shovel so that he gets a worm's-eye view with each shovelful of dirt. [Laughter.]

Then, too, there are places for a more formal sort of education. McCloud, do you feel an older person must hesitate about going back to school?

MR. McCLOUD: Of course, it is a difficult thing to get away from self-consciousness. But you will just have to try to let yourself go. Forget about yourself. Think about the other individual. As a matter of fact, it is an education in itself to attend one of the evening schools of the great universities. There you will see the melting pot of America—people from all walks of life. They have ambition; they are making sacrifices to get this education. You will find the instructor is covering in two short hours there the work he generally covers on the other campus—the day campus—in six or eight hours.

MR. BUCHANAN: You mean the difference between the college student who spends full time at school and the evening student on the downtown campus here in Chicago?

MR. McCLOUD: Yes.

MR. SEASHORE: At another university the same courses were given by the same instructors to the regular college students and to the downtown evening classes. On objective examinations the part-time evening group—in other words the older group—had superior scores in the majority of classes.

MR. POSEY: I am not at all surprised at that from my observations. However, formal classes in books aren't all. One system that works very well is to pick some subject in which you are interested and then invite a number of your friends over for an evening of discussion. Tell them before they come that this is not going to be a gossip session or a free-for-all on any and every subject on earth but that the discussion will be limited to the specific subject named.

'Posey Plan' of Discussion

MR. SEASHORE: Well, give us an example, Posey. How do you start off this conversation in your home?

MR. POSEY: You actually start before you make the phone calls to invite the people over. I would say that a person should ask himself this question: What do I most want to do? In which subject am I most interested? You pick that one and assemble a discussion group on that basis.

MR. SEASHORE: My father tried such a discussion once. He asked his friends to talk on "What will be the probable state of affairs in my vocation ten years from now?" to see how good they would be as prophets. He found that most of his friends had great difficulty in imagining what would happen even in their own lives. But it stimulated them to think beyond that one evening of discussion.

MR. BUCHANAN: You might call that the "Posey Plan" of party-giving, then.

I suppose there are other means, too, the theater or music. McCloud, have you rounded out your education with these other aspects?

MR. McCLOUD: In a modern suburb of Chicago there is a small park known as Ravinia Park. Each year during the summer there the Chicago Symphony Orchestra gives concerts, led by various conductors from all over the world. To the music lovers that place is a paradise because there they find real music. To the individual who does not know anything about music it is an education in that world. For instance, you not only hear the superb orchestra render these pieces of classic and modern music, but you also see the great

conductors. You will notice how the conductor is an artist, how he weaves the various instruments together to bring out this harmony. After a while, if you have attended a few concerts, you will want to listen for certain parts to be repeated.

MR. BUCHANAN: What if I don't care for music? Should I try to get a liking for it?

MR. McCLOUD: By attending these concerts you cannot help but get a liking for it, whether you are interested in it or not. It grows on you. You will be carried away with it.

MR. SEASHORE: That is like my art gallery experience. You can ask your friends, or you can read in the papers about the conductor, the composer, the composition, and then you see more and hear more in the program than if you just went to hear the music without any preparation.

MR. BUCHANAN: All right, let us assume I am convinced. Now I want to learn and I have found out some of the things I can look into. But how do I start, Posey?

MR. POSEY: The best way to start is to get started. There are many people who for years and years have said, "Oh, I wish I could do this; I wish I could do that." The only way to do it is to do it.

William James' Three Steps

MR. SEASHORE: I would like to quote the words of the immortal William James, who is such a great comfort to psychologists on every subject. He said that in this case there are three steps in getting started. The first is to make a public resolve. Tell other people that you are going to find out about the music that you are going to hear at Ravinia or the sermon you are going to hear next Sunday. The second is to start now—not next week, but right after this program. And the third is to suffer no exceptions to occur.

MR. McCLOUD: Come on in . . . the water's fine.

MR. POSEY: There comes a time when one must translate a desire or a wish into action. And unless you want to keep on vaguely desiring the rest of your life you are going to have to take such a step.

MR. BUCHANAN: You have been convincing, gentlemen, in your arguments that all of us can continue to learn long after we are out of school. And you have offered valuable suggestions, I think, to anyone who wants to broaden his life by this continuation of learning. Simply enough you advise that the best way to begin is to begin. It reminds me of the Chinese proverb, "The most difficult part of a thousand-mile journey is the first step."





Suggested Readings

Compiled by the Reference Department,
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HENDRY, CHARLES E., Editor. *A Decade of Group Work*. New York, Association Press, 1948.

A discussion of adult education through group work by members of the American Association of Group Workers.

JONES, ANNA MAY. *Time Education*. New York, Harper, 1946.

Helpful for teachers and group leaders.

KING, MARTHA BENNETT. *Money Management, the Recreation Dollar*. Chicago, Household Finance Corporation, 1948.

An interesting forty-seven page pamphlet on fun for leisure time.

KINGSLEY, HOWARD L. *The Nature and Conditions of Learning*. New York. Prentice-Hall, 1946.

Describes learning as a process which changes the responses of individuals.

LAMPLAND, RUTH, Editor. *Hobbies for Everybody*. New York, Harper, 1934.

Fifty-six authorities describe their favorite hobbies.

SEASHORE, ROBERT H., Editor. *Fields of Psychology*. New York, Holt, 1942.

Chapters on modern research including avocational psychology.

STIERI, EMANUELE. *The Book of Indoor Hobbies*. New York, Whittlesey House, 1939.

Practical, detailed directions which are well illustrated.

Adult Education Journal. 6:14-18, January, '47. "For Civic Efficiency; Some Objectives for an Adult Citizenship Project." G. E. Carpenter.

Considers definite subjects to be taught to bring up the lag in "social knowledge."

Adult Education Journal. 6:70-75, April, '47. "Evaluating Adult Education . . ." G. Burch.

Believes that adult education should be a community venture.

Adult Education Journal. 6:104-111, July, '47. "Education for Adulthood." A. Locke.

Shows the need for continued educative effort.

Educational Forum. 11:417-21, May, '47. "Assignment for Life." G. Smith.

"Look, listen, read and think to the end of your days" is this interesting assignment by an author who lists *his* choice of great books.

Etude. 66:143+, March, '48. "Making a Specialty of Teaching Adults." D. K. Antrim, N. D. Kane. Editors.

Suggestions for teaching music to adults.

Library Quarterly. 18:52-59, January, '48. "The Great Books' Discussion Groups." G. F. Bowerman.

An experiment in the Washington, D.C. Public Library.

Nation's Business. 36:58, May, '48. "Glassware Rebel." L. Galton.

How a \$30 hobby became a \$500,000 a year business in ten year's time.



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